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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [GM](#)

SUBJECT: IRAN: MFA DISCUSSES DEMOCRACY PROGRAMMING WITH
VISITING DEMOCRACY COORDINATOR COBERLY

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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Jeffrey Rathke for reasons
1.4(b)/(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Visiting Iran Desk Officer Carolyn Coberly and MFA officials discussed U.S. and German efforts on Iran-related democracy programming, the upcoming Iranian elections, and the current Iranian human rights situation on February 25. The MFA officials expressed great interest in supporting Iranian civil society, but noted their uncertainty on how to proceed for fear of endangering Iranian contacts on the ground. Germany currently focuses on cultural programming, an approach that, in their view, mirrors EU member states' preference to work on "inconspicuous" topics and exchange programs. The MFA also shared perspectives on the upcoming Iranian elections, calling for international statements to focus on international election standards, and noted that recent EU human rights demarches have shown some success in influencing Iranian behavior. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) DISCUSSION OF USG PROGRAMMING FOCUSED ON LOGISTICS, POTENTIAL WORK AREAS: During a February discussion with visiting Iran Desk Officer Carolyn Coberly on USG democracy programming, MFA Office Director for Middle East Affairs Sabine Sparwasser and Senior Iran Desk Officer Deike Potzel focused their questions on the logistics of conducting such programs without an embassy in Tehran, as well as how the U.S. deals with potential risks to participants. They expressed particular interest in improving messaging to Iran and consider the internet, rather than broadcasting, to be the best medium for such efforts. Potzel asked if the U.S. would consider assisting U.N. organizations on the ground in Iran like UNHCR or UNODC; in a similar vein, Sparwasser asked if the USG would consider using democracy funds for joint U.S.-Iranian NGO work on Iraq-related projects on apolitical issues like environment and health. Coberly noted it may not be possible for the democracy program to fund international organizations; she added that Iranian participants have expressed most interest in working with European NGOs rather than on Iraq or Afghanistan-related activities.

13. (C) GERMANS CONCERNED OWN PROGRAMMING COULD HARM CONTACTS: Sparwasser said that Germany is willing to do more on democracy assistance to Iranian civil society but noted that the high degree of Iranian regime paranoia and the continuing crackdown on Iranian civil society have caused concern that their programs would put Iranian contacts in harm's way. She added that a prominent Iranian-American scholar had advised her to "leave (Iranian) NGOs alone" and that approaching people in-country is dangerous. Sparwasser said that the scholar had recommended instead to pursue cultural exchange, a track which Germany has actively pursued. Recent examples include participation at Iranian film festivals and a traveling German theater group's

award-winning production of Brecht's "Mother Courage" in Tehran.

14. (C) EU EQUALLY CAUTIOUS: Sparwasser then discussed how EU member states view support for Iranian civil society (NOTE: Sparwasser regularly participates in EU CoMEM expert meetings on Iran). EU countries are careful not to endanger contacts, balancing between outreach and preserving contacts that already exist, she said. EU members instead prefer to work on "inconspicuous" topics and to conduct exchange visits on topics like architecture and local government. Potzel cited the example of an upcoming MFA-sponsored visitor program during which a group of journalists, Tehran city council members from across the political spectrum, and Majles MPs will visit Berlin to discuss municipal affairs. She added that working via regional and international networks (to include the UNHCR and UNODC), as well as interreligious dialogue projects, are potential areas for future EU efforts.

15. (C) NEED FOR GENERAL INTERNATIONAL STATEMENTS ON MAJLES ELECTIONS: Turning to the March 14 Majles elections, Sparwasser noted that many open questions remain regarding which candidates were actually reinstated after initially being excluded by Iranian authorities. She questioned whether international statements might feed the Iranian regime's paranoia, adding that the international community must keep this in mind while drafting statements on the elections. Potzel added that statements should be general in nature and draw attention to international electoral standards, using phrases describing electoral procedures and parliaments "in any country." Sparwasser noted Germany's low expectations for the elections, but thought that the pragmatic conservatives and a handful of reformers could be strengthened, creating a parliament that would be more critical of Ahmadi-Nejad than the current Majles. She added that the elections could also serve to strengthen some 2009

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presidential candidates, but did not elaborate on any specific individual.

16. (C) EU HUMAN RIGHTS STATEMENTS EFFECTIVE: Potzel and Sparwasser also commented that recent EU demarches seem to be making some impact on Iran's human rights policies. Potzel noted both the increased number and critical nature of recent EU demarches and public statements. She noted that the EU efforts seem to have resulted in some positive signs, including Judiciary Chief Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi's recent decision to ban public executions. She added that Shahroudi and his spokesperson had asked to visit Germany, noting that Shahroudi wants to see changes made on juvenile delinquency laws.

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